

COUNTRY

OVERVIEW



& PACKING

GUIDELINES

Iceland:
Climate Change and the Arctic
Spring 2024



SIT SCHOOL FOR
INTERNATIONAL
TRAINING
STUDY ABROAD

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COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Please note that information is subject to change based on shifting conditions in the US and Iceland.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Iceland was settled by Vikings in the late ninth century. Various Scandinavian countries ruled Iceland at different times, most recently Denmark. When Germany invaded Denmark during World War II, Icelanders took the opportunity to declare their independence.

Iceland was essentially a subsistence economy from settlement until World War II. Over the centuries since settlement, Icelanders endured many unfavorable climate changes and natural disasters (e.g. volcanic eruptions), exacerbated by deforestation and soil erosion. Starting in the mid-20th century, mechanization of the fishing fleet and increasing world demand for fish brought new prosperity to the small population. In the last 60 years, Iceland has steadily built up its economy, infrastructure, educational system, and social services, and today it has one of the highest quality of life standards in the world. Although tourism recently passed fishing as the largest contributor to



GDP, fish are still the most important export. Other industries are growing, notably aluminum smelted with inexpensive and renewable electricity. The population is still small, with around 366,000 inhabitants, about two-thirds of which is concentrated in the capital area.

CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Reykjavík is the northernmost national capital in the world, and Iceland has more land covered by glaciers than in all of continental Europe, yet Iceland enjoys a much milder climate than its name and location straddling the Arctic Circle would imply. A branch of the Gulf Stream flows along the southern and western coasts, greatly moderating the climate. This brings mild Atlantic air in contact with cold Arctic air, resulting in a climate that is marked by frequent changes in weather and storminess. There is also more rainfall in the southern and western part than in the northern part of the island.

Reykjavík, Iceland: AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES (°F)

FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
38/28	39/30	43/34	50/39
AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV
58/46	52/43	45/37	39/32

As a result of the Gulf Stream, Iceland boasts a very temperate climate. Reykjavík has comparatively mild winters. While temperatures dip below zero degrees Fahrenheit along the same latitude in New England, Reykjavík typically hovers between 30–35 degrees Fahrenheit. The weather in Iceland is constantly changing, so you can easily experience wind, snow, sleet, and sunny skies in a single day, and despite so much variability, Icelanders continue with their normal routines, taking their bikes out in freezing rain or holding recess outside when it's sleeting. If anything, Iceland's weather teaches you resiliency. Icelanders are also well equipped to handle the abundance of darkness during the winter months, making their homes, cafés, and restaurants as cozy and inviting as possible, and never

forgetting their *lýsi*, a cod liver oil supplement that gives you the Vitamin D you need when the sun disappears. With a little patience on such long nights, you will be treated to the magnificent light show of the Northern Lights.

LOCAL CUSTOMS

Icelandic culture is somewhat similar to that of its Scandinavian neighbors: sophisticated and modern with a dark sense of humor and rarely a cold disposition. However, Iceland is notably eccentric due to its isolation, rugged environment, and small population. Icelanders, especially outside the capital, can be very friendly towards visitors. It is appropriate to greet strangers on the street with a nod or hello, and particularly with an Icelandic greeting such as “Góðan daginn” all day and “Góða kvöldið” in the evening. Below is a guide to help you assimilate.

Do:

- Greet people you meet.
- Take off your shoes when you go into someone’s home.
- Always say thank you at the end of a meal. It is a customary gesture to the host(s).
- Socialize with your hosts and others acquaintances.

Don’t:

- Talk or laugh very loudly, making a scene in the street. Be modest.
- Help yourself to food or towels, etc. in your host family’s home until you have been given permission.
- Wear shoes inside someone’s home. It is a cultural faux pas.

Iceland is a progressive nation and men and women are equally expected to participate in household activities including cooking, cleaning, and caretaking, so be active in your host home!

DIET

Special Diets:

SIT Study Abroad provides experiential learning opportunities where students become embedded in their host community. As such, we strive to accommodate serious food allergies where possible, but we simply cannot ensure that all dietary restrictions or non-medically mandated diets can be accommodated.

Students are encouraged to participate in the local food culture as a central aspect of daily life. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture. Due to the unique living and learning community central to all SIT programs, we cannot separate food and eating communally (including with your host family) from the program experience. Please consider local diet seriously when selecting your program of choice. Your admissions counselor is a great resource in better understanding the local diet.

Remembering that for centuries Icelanders clung to life on a windswept rock in the North Atlantic, it is easy to see why traditional diets consist mostly of seafood, grazing animals, and dairy products. Opportunities to grow any grains or vegetables were extremely limited (potatoes and cabbage being the only notable exceptions). With modern technology and transportation, opportunities have changed. Some Icelanders eat “world diets” not much different from those in the States, though traditional diets of course remain. Dietary options thus may (or may not) be limited, depending on your particular situation, and may include fish, animals, or parts of animals that seem unusual. Each person must decide how to cope with the realities of food choice, and should give this some consideration beforehand.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform our office prior to the start of your program. We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is critical to having a successful semester. To help you do that, we have provided [Health Guidelines and Requirements](#) for your program.

It is very important that you read the Health Guidelines and Requirements document as early as possible and examine it with your medical provider. The guidelines include recommended immunizations; a suggested calendar for immunizations and other prophylaxes; and valuable information on how to avoid exposure to common carriers of disease.

SIT no longer requires vaccination to participate on programs except for locations where host country governments require it.

However, we strongly encourage students to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 per CDC recommendations. SIT continues to closely monitor COVID-19 conditions in each program location and will advise students on any location-specific COVID-19 requirements and regulations prior to and during their program.

Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For instance, coming prepared with face masks for personal use if individual venues/location requirements deem in necessary after arrival. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, accident and illness insurance, and general program tips, please read the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) document and [Student Handbook](#).

First and foremost, please know that your academic director has your best interests in mind and has set rules that will prevent most risky situations. While Iceland is a very safe country in many ways, some of the hazards are different than those found in other countries.

Iceland is very sparsely populated. In some parts of Iceland, one can travel for hours without seeing any



other people or any signs of civilization. It is easy to become lost, and if one were to be injured, help might not be close at hand. Thus, it is important to travel in groups and always let your academic director know your destination and expected return time.

Because of the large area and small population in Iceland, hazards are much less likely to be marked than in the US. There are few guardrails around waterfalls and cliffs, for example, and warning signs are only found in a few areas frequented by tourists. Icelanders expect people to always exercise their own common sense. Likewise, we expect you to use good common sense and not approach cliffs or venture into unsafe circumstances.

Varying weather conditions combined with high latitude in Iceland can lead quickly to hypothermia. The weather changes often and quickly, so appropriate clothing (warm layers and a rain jacket) should always be taken on outings, regardless of how the weather appears at departure. Freshwater rivers and lakes as well as the ocean are very cold around Iceland. Falling into water can quickly lead to hypothermia and drowning, regardless of one's swimming ability.

Hot water is also a significant hazard in Iceland. In geothermal zones the ground is quite fragile, and one can break through the thin surface crust into



boiling water or mud below. Always stay on marked paths in geothermal areas—every year a number of tourists are badly scalded or killed at these sites. Tap water in many parts of the country comes directly from geothermal wells, and is much hotter than we would expect in the US. Be careful when turning on taps and especially when getting in a shower.

Though infrequent, a number of natural disasters are possible in Iceland, including volcanic eruptions, avalanches, earthquakes, floods, and hurricane-force winds. Your in-country orientation will cover procedures to be followed in these unlikely circumstances.

You will experience the strong seasonal shift between very long winter nights and long summer days. This can be disorienting and can make sleeping difficult. Be aware that sleep deprivation can impair judgment and increase risk of accidents, as well as being unpleasant. Eyeshades for sleeping may be helpful during the beginning of the fall semester and the end of the spring semester (most Northerners learn to sleep in the light and do not have heavy shades in their homes).

Please note: Students will be expected to pay up-front medical costs for routine and minor ailments. They can then file for reimbursement through the insurance provided by the program.

Although all healthcare services are available in Iceland, we suggest that you have a complete health checkup prior to leaving the US, including a dental checkup and any subsequent work.

There will be access to pharmacies, health centers, emergency services and/or hospitals at all the main program locations should you need them. You will

be briefed in orientation with basic information about how to utilize these services, and your program staff can also help you make appropriate appointments. In Ísafjörður and Reykjavík, there are counseling services and hospitals with 24-hour emergency receptions. In Iceland there is also a nationwide emergency hotline open 24-7 for tele-assistance. When the group is traveling in the countryside, healthcare providers may be limited to a doctor's office or small health center with limited opening hours. Your program staff will always do whatever possible to ensure you are safe and healthy and to help you get any care you need.

HOMESTAYS

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what constitutes a "home" may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities and expectations.

Each program's homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. **Please note: in order to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in country. Therefore, SIT will not provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.**

In this program, you will be staying in one homestay in Ísafjörður for about three weeks. While Ísafjörður is the “capital” of the Westfjords, its population is only about 3,000. Homestay families will be scattered around the small town, and in some cases, in neighboring towns, but most places are within walking distance, so it’s easy to get around. The University Centre, where classes will be held, is located downtown, close to bakeries, cafés, and shops.

OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Other than your homestay, most accommodations will be hostels. Rooms are in dormitories, with shared common facilities such as kitchen and bathroom. In non-homestay locations, the group will do its own food shopping and cooking, so come prepared to cook. Helping out with cooking is normally appreciated during the homestay as well.

You will be able to do laundry during your homestay. It will also be possible to do laundry in some of the other places we travel around Iceland.

TRANSPORTATION

The group will be traveling with both public and privately hired transportation, mostly by van. At times you will be required to carry ALL of your luggage—generally, 20kg is a manageable amount. If your luggage is unmanageable you will need to pay for a taxi, which can be expensive.



COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It’s important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

PHONES AND E-MAIL

As part of SIT’s commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working cell phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls, including a data plan so that your phone is operational when you are away from wifi. If needed, during orientation SIT Study Abroad staff can assist students in purchasing a local SIM card, and how to acquire minutes for calls and texting.

We will help you acquire a SIM card when you arrive. It will cost approximately ISK 2,000 – 3,000 (USD \$17 – 25) to keep credit on the phone. To keep your phone topped up with credit you can purchase vouchers in almost any shop or pay online with a credit card. If you choose to buy a local smart phone it will cost around ISK 20,000 (USD \$170). The cost to keep your phone full of credit will vary depending on how much you use your phone. International calls are more expensive and month to month costs will fluctuate.

Free Wi-Fi is widely available in Iceland at cafés, restaurants, and other public locations.



MAILINGS

Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually **expensive** and **can be complicated**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged.

For this program, **DHL and FedEx services are available in country**. Despite cheaper prices, reliance on the US Postal Service is not advised due to delays and unreliability. When given the option, it's always a good idea to send packages certified and with a tracking number that allows the sender to track the package.

Mail is very expensive, unpredictable, and slow. **You are strongly discouraged from having packages or letters sent to you in Iceland**. If you must have letters or packages sent, they must arrive between a set date window, please email your admission counselor for the exact dates that mail should arrive for you in Iceland.

Student Name

C/O World Learning Iceland
Suðurgata 12

400 Ísafjörður
ICELAND

MONEY

In addition to tuition, SIT Study Abroad program fees cover room and board throughout the program. When room and/or board are not taken with the group, students will be given a stipend to cover related expenses. SIT will cover daily commuting costs, if any, and excursions that are part of the normal program itinerary. During the ISP period, students will receive a stipend for **basic room and board**, and the remaining stipend is to be used for ISP associated travel and project costs. **Any extra domestic travel, interpretation services, or supplies necessary for the ISP may be the students' responsibility**. Please plan accordingly.

The Icelandic currency is the Icelandic krona (króna), abbreviated ISK. While most things are available in Iceland, prices tend to be high: expect to pay at least twice the US price for most items. For instance, restaurant food, electronics, and English text books are particularly expensive.

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don't inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

Following are suggestions for spending money during the program, including estimates for textbooks, any ISP-related expenses, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Figures are based on recent student evaluations, though

individual spending habits vary widely and **these costs are averages.**

A suggested total amount of money to budget ranges from **US \$1,475 to \$2,700.** To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program, including travel costs for your planned ISP or a specific personal expense.

Check current exchange rates:

<http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>

Please budget approximately:

Personal spending: (from past student suggestions)	\$750-1,800
Books, printing, supplies:	\$100
Up-front medical costs: (you will get reimbursed for medical costs)	\$600
COVID-19 Test(s) (costs may vary)	\$100-250*
Cell phone costs	\$25 - 200
Estimated total:	\$1,475- 2,700

VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the

term, due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the Attendance and Participation section of the [Student Handbook](#).

Please note that any visitors during the course of the program must plan their own independent accommodations; SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist. Please note that you will not have a long break during the program, such as Thanksgiving or Spring Break.

PACKING GUIDELINES

LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you will likely be acquiring more belongings while abroad.

Usually only one carry-on is permitted on the plane; we recommend a small daypack, which will also be useful for short excursions when on the program. A rolling suitcase or multiday backpack is a good option for your checked luggage. This program travels frequently, and you will be required to carry ALL of your luggage—generally, 45-50 pounds (20-25 kg) is a manageable amount. As a rule of thumb, think practical!



Although we try to avoid small domestic flights, sometimes we have to take them if road conditions aren't suitable for long drives. On these flights, you are allowed to bring one piece of checked luggage at 20 kg and one piece of carry-on luggage at 6 kg. Each additional kilogram for overweight baggage costs 400 ISK (about \$3 USD) and will be your responsibility.

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the "General Health Tips" section in the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration

(<http://www.tsa.gov>) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

CLOTHING GUIDELINES

The weather may change quickly from hot and sunny to cold winds, rain, and snow. Plan to dress in layers—as it gets warmer or colder, you can simply eliminate or add layers. A waterproof outer layer over wool sweater or heavy fleece pullover and a light base layer is commonly worn by locals. We will be walking in urban areas and hiking in the wilderness, so be sure you have comfortable, waterproof footwear, as well as a rain jacket. Umbrellas are not suggested, as strong winds frequently flip them inside out. Students in the past have strongly recommended rain pants. You will visit some of Iceland's geothermally heated swimming pools and "hot pots," so bring a swim suit that you are comfortable in. You will also need warm headgear, a scarf, and gloves.

EQUIPMENT

You are **encouraged** to bring at least two journals; one will be your field/ISP journal, and the other a reflective journal. Both will help you get in the habit of recording important information.

COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is **required** that you bring a laptop computer. If you bring a laptop, the computer will be your personal property and responsibility. SIT does not provide personal property insurance and it is recommended that you insure your computer or other valuables for full coverage. For details on SIT's insurance, please see the full Description of Coverage on our [Student Insurance](#). SIT is not responsible for any duty tax you may have to pay when you enter the country, theft, or loss.

We will be traveling a great deal on this program, and many of the program elements (readings, assignments, schedules, etc.) will be accessible only on our program web page; you will also be asked to submit most assignments electronically. Thus, **having a laptop computer is extremely important**, and internet connections are good

almost everywhere in Iceland. **Do not have your laptop or other electronics mailed to you while in Iceland.** You may be charged hundreds of dollars in customs duty, no matter how much you actually paid for them.

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters. <http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/>.

Do not bring any electrical appliances without a voltage converter and a two-prong European plug adapter; the electricity voltage is 220 in Iceland.

GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Try to choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community in which you live. Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas.

Most host families have children (or grandchildren), so it's a good idea to bring small toys or candy for them. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Most Icelanders love chocolate and candy. Once you are

on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share.

You will not meet your homestay family in Iceland until after your first excursion, so make sure any gifts you bring are light and easy to pack.

WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Bring a reasonable but not excessive supply of shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste, tampons, etc. These items can easily be bought in Iceland, but are likely more expensive and the varieties you want may not be available. Prescriptions are difficult to obtain, so please bring what you will need and a copy of the written prescription from your doctor in case of loss.

ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or [Contact a Former Student](#).

Don't miss the Packing List on the next page!

These packing guidelines are based on suggestions from past students and your academic director.

PACKING LIST

CLOTHING

- 1-2 nicer outfit(s) appropriate for a dinner out, cultural events, or meeting with government officials
- Active wear: for those who wish to access the gym or hike a lot
- 3-4 pairs of pants
- 8-10 shirts
- 1-2 sweaters or fleeces (wool and synthetic materials are recommended)
- Underwear (two-week supply, as doing laundry is expensive, and sometimes not available)
- Thermal underwear and base layers (wool and synthetic materials are recommended)
- Socks (two-week supply -including some wool socks for cold days and outdoor activities)
- pajamas
- Raincoat/outer shell (go for quality, it will be worth it)
- Cold weather layering (down or synthetic jacket, inner shell)
- Rain pants
- Warm hat, scarf, and multiple pairs of gloves/mittens
- Swimsuit (for public pools and hot springs)

SHOES

- 1 pair comfortable, everyday shoes for walking around town
- 1 pair **waterproof** boots (Should be comfortable for hiking and use in snow)
- 1 pair nice shoes that you can wear with your nice outfit (can be same as everyday shoes if you would like, should be comfortable)
- Shoe spikes or cleats for walking on icy streets (Yaktrax or similar)
- Shower shoes for hostels

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- 2 passport photos (in case you want to open a bank account or if your passport is lost)
- Proof of COVID-19 Vaccine encouraged

HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- 1-2 tubes of toothpaste, floss
- Adequate supply of prescription medication (birth control, vitamins, and motion sickness pills, if needed)

- Extra supply of contacts and solution (Extra pair of glasses if needed)
- Adequate supply of feminine hygiene products (Iceland may not have the products you use)
- Shampoo, conditioner, soap, etc.

OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- School supplies (1-2 notebooks, writing utensils)
- Credit or debit card
- Electricity converter and/or European two prong adapter
- Laptop
- Water bottle

OPTIONAL

- Sunglasses
- Personal journal
- House shoes/slippers
- "Going out" clothes
- Earplugs and eye masks
- Travel towel (hostels and homestays provide towels)
- Coffee/tea thermos/cup
- Camera
- Tripod
- Duffle bag (in case you want to take things home at the end of the program)

NOTES

- Most locations have access to a gym and public pools (Bring necessary activewear if you plan on utilizing these facilities)
- A lot of walking is involved on the trip with a range of difficulties (Comfortable, waterproof shoes are of utmost importance)
- Frequent moves between locations